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SERMON XXX.

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PRIDE ABASED BY THE GOSPEL.

1 Corinthians, i. 29.—*That no flesh should glory in his presence.*

The gospel found the citizens of Corinth immersed in vice, and devoted, with an almost idolatrous attachment, to the false philosophy, and artificial eloquence of the Greeks. They had their masters in each of these departments, who attracted crowds of pupils, and who, as rivals, were sustained, and cheered in their competitions for intellectual fame, by the praises of their respective followers. After their professed reception of Christianity, the Corinthians still clung, with fond tenacity, to the wisdom of words; valued to excess miraculous gifts; boasted of their attainments in knowledge; and sought in the preachers of the gospel the same attributes, which they had been accustomed to admire in their heathen teachers. Hence parties arose, and divided the church with unhallowed contentions. Each had his favourite leader, who was applauded, chiefly for his supposed proficiency in the rules of reasoning, or his skill in the artifices of a studied rhetoric; while, in the eyes of his partial friends, it was a crime even to call in question his superiority to all competitors. From the heat and acrimony of their disputes, it seemed as if the Corinthians ascribed the success of the gospel to the decorations with which it was recommended to the world; and it was too plain, that, with all their professions, they had little experimental acquaintance with its transforming power. To correct their errors, and to humble their pride, is evidently a prime object of the apostle, in the context. He reproves their divisions, their party zeal, and their extravagant antipathies and predilections, as hearers of the word; he gives to the gospel the praise of achieving, through a divine influence, the salvation of men; and he pours contempt on those distinctions, by which the hearts of the Corinthians had been inflated.—"We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called," or *have called you to the knowledge of Christ, and his salvation;* "but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are; THAT NO FLESH SHOULD GLORY IN HIS PRESENCE."

The text, in its connexion, suggests this sentiment: IT IS THE PURPOSE OF GOD, IN THE DISPENSATIONS OF HIS GRACE, TO STAIN THE PRIDE OF ALL HUMAN GLORY.

1. In illustration of this sentiment we remark, first, that the general plan of grace, disclosed in the gospel, *originated wholly with God.*

Men, proud of their sagacity, and impatient of submission, would prescribe to their Maker himself, the principles by which he should act,—regulate, by their limited views of public justice, his conduct towards all intelligent beings,—and arraign him, for acquittal or condemnation, at the tribunal of their own infallibility. Not a few of the theological controversies, with which the church has been agitated, relate rather to what is becoming in God, than to what he has actually done, or revealed it as his purpose to do. All would see the conceited folly of a child, who should dispute vehemently against political measures he could not comprehend, or who, incapable of pursuing the steps of a mathematical demonstration, should pronounce as impossible and absurd, all the grand results of the Newtonian philosophy;—yet it is not so readily conceded that a creature of yesterday, confined to a little spot, and deriving his all from an intelligence and benevolence above him, is of too narrow an understanding to explore the heights, and fathom the depths, and grasp the infinitude of God Almighty. This diminutive creature, to whom his own existence is a mystery,—to whom every insect, every blade of grass, every ray of light, is pregnant with wonders, would prescribe what is to be done in all worlds; ordain a new Providence upon earth; kindle a brighter radiance in the heavens; and dissolve by a touch the chains, and bolts, and prison-walls, prepared by eternal justice, for rebels and outlaws. But self-sufficient as man is, he has not been consulted upon any of the great purposes of infinite wisdom. No inquiry was made of him, concerning his own existence and allotments, or the rank and condition that should be assigned to other beings. He was not asked, whether sin should be permitted to mar this beautiful creation; nor was he allowed to suggest a single hint on the possibility, or the means of human salvation. On all such subjects God determines as he pleases. At the very outset then, pride feels itself neglected and scorned. "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?"

2. The *plan of salvation itself* is eminently fitted to abase human pride.

Man would have a scheme of mercy, flattering to the notions, he loves to entertain, of his own dignity and excellence, exalting him to happiness, and grandeur, and immortality, as his birth-right; and giving him, what the lofty-minded stoic had feigned—a kind of equality with God, in independence and virtue. He would enjoy his elevation, here and hereafter, with such conscious self-complacency and proud contempt as are felt by the bloated sons of wealth, passing by the hovels of the poor, or the homely forms that ply life's vulgar occupations. He would carve for himself his high destiny. He would mark with his own finger the way that conducts to glory. If God must interpose, let it be such an interposition, as shall proclaim the worthiness and importance of the objects of his kindness, no less than the omnipotence, and majesty, and righteousness, and mercy, of their Deliverer. Let there be wonders on earth, and signs in heaven. Let the heavens cleave asunder, and a visible arm of strength be let down

from the regions of eternal day. "Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean?"

The plan, which the Most High has revealed, annihilates all such aspiring imaginations. It assumes as a first principle, that man, allied in intellect to angelic minds, is yet despoiled by all his moral loveliness, a spiritual bankrupt, a rebel, bound over to everlasting perdition. To him, his Father's house has no attractions; his Father's presence creates in his bosom only gloom, and terror, and despair. Christianity tells him plainly, that he cannot be justified, that he cannot advance one step towards justification, by all his resolutions, his tears, his sacrifices, his sufferings. If he repent, it is because his obstinacy is subdued, and his heart melted, by the sovereign energy of the Holy Spirit. If he is pardoned, it is through the blood and righteousness of an incarnate God. "He was made sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. Christ is the end of the law for righteousness, to every one that believeth." Yes; another receives all the glory; while the sinner, casting himself at the footstool of eternal mercy, counts all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord. Where are his duties and his virtues now? Salvation by the cross! How it puts to shame and to silence all his boastings, and lays his honours in the dust.

3. The *circumstances under which the great Author of salvation appeared and lived in the world*, were adapted to stain the pride of all human glory.

Prophecy had described the promised Deliverer as a King, higher than the potentates of the earth, extending his dominion over all the nations and tribes of men; and the Jew, warmed by these descriptions, had invested his Messiah in all the pomp of wealth, the splendours of royalty, and the terrors of military conquest. To him, who should proclaim himself as their supreme Sovereign, and claim their undivided homage, the Gentiles also would naturally ascribe an external magnificence, such as they had been accustomed to admire, in their own monarchs, heroes, and statesmen; they would in imagination gather around him all the fascinations of genius, science, rank, affluence, and power;—and we may easily conceive the disappointment they would feel, should they behold him treading in the lowliest walks of life, choosing as his associates the humble and unlearned, familiar with all the forms of blameless poverty, and neither coveting, nor commending any of those honours, with which the world loves to encircle the brow, and eternize the names of her favourites. Such was the disappointment of both Jews and Gentiles, at the manifestation of the Son of God. It was a manifestation, that seemed purposely to mortify and shame all the notions of superiority and greatness, they had ever before cherished. "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." As no sound of trumpets, no human acclamations signalized the nativity of him, whose birthplace was a stable in Bethlehem, and whose parentage corresponded to the lowliness of his infancy; so no subsequent events of his life, in the view of the worldly ambitious, served to redeem him from the disgrace of his original obscurity. Fame, as the reward of secular exploits, he never sought: he treated it as worthless. Profound as was his wisdom, he never displayed it for his own aggrandizement; and vast as was his power,

he never exerted it, but in deeds of beneficence. He seemed like humility, meekness, gentleness, and purity, personified; going forth, under a load of sorrow, to teach, by his own example, the littleness of all sublunary grandeur; to bless the miserable, though his enemies; and to kindle in the bosoms of men, such affections and hopes, as should displace, or consume all the elements of earthliness, sensuality, and vain-glory. Remote from the halls of princes, and the schools of learning, he was disciplined to the toils of his future ministry, by acts of filial duty, and by the labours of an occupation as severe in its requisitions, as it was unhonoured and unsung. After his entrance upon the more public services of his embassy, when his divinity was attested by miracles on earth, and voices from heaven, he continued to evince the same indifference he had manifested in the lowly character of the carpenter, to all the proud distinctions of human greatness. While he preached righteousness, healed diseases, and put in requisition all the powers of nature, to sustain his authority, as the Legislator and Redeemer of mankind; he still exhibited an unostentatious simplicity, and submitted to the most humiliating offices of philanthropy. Wealth and equipage, he had none. "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." So he lived; and, in full coincidence with the undeviating testimony of his life, his death seemed like a designed inversion of all the notions engendered by pride. In his whole history, from the manger to the cross, there was nothing which did not present an example of a *taste*, a *spirit*, a *character*, as hostile to the ordinary principles that govern human beings, as contentment is opposed to avarice,—unobtrusive modesty to the pageantry of power,—and patient endurance of every evil, to the fierceness and restlessness of ambition.

4. *In his selection of individuals to the blessings of his kingdom*, God exercises a sovereignty, which pours contempt on all the pride of man.

He looks upon the whole family of Adam as rebels, who have forfeited his kindness; and from the corrupt mass he separates to himself such portions, as he had predestinated to so exalted a privilege. For he saith to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then, it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy." In his choice of men "to the adoption of sons," the peculiar reasons for his preference are always concealed; and his conduct is often marked by a conspicuous disregard of all that confers elevation and influence among the sons of pride.

Is genius an envied distinction? Coveted as its honours are, they procure no favour with him who hides the things of his gospel from the wise and prudent, and reveals them unto babes. To men of no intellectual pretensions, the Word of God often comes with resistless power, conquering all their obduracy, and impressing on their hearts his own lovely image; while minds, fitted for the loftiest and widest views, and formed to draw in their train hosts of inferior intelligences,—swelling with the consciousness of independence and might,—turn away with sullen scorn from a religion, which publishes good tidings to the meek, and which would prostrate at a Saviour's feet all the high powers of the soul, and all its proud imaginations.

Is learning honourable among men? We would not wrest from the scholar one of his hard-earned laurels: we admire his industry; we are thankful for his discoveries; and, if guided by the love of virtue and of truth, we assign to him no ordinary rank among the benefactors of his species.

Let him remember, however, that our applause may be bestowed upon those whom Christ will at last reject; that no mental cultivation can exalt man to a moral union with his Maker; and that he, who distributes gifts as he pleases, may confer on the humble peasant that grace which may be withheld from the wise, the mighty, and the noble. Multitudes who knew only the simple truths of the Bible, have ascended to glory, leaning on the arm of their Redeemer; while thousands, from the very summit of intellectual fame, have plunged into the blackness of darkness for ever.

Is birth an occasion of pride? See, how

> "He pours abundant shame
> On honourable blood."

Not to say, that "the boast of heraldry" is often allied to meanness and vice, which annihilate, in whomsoever they may be found, all claims to respect from men;—not to say, how degenerate and how abject the progeny may be, of ancestors renowned in story;—we well know, from the history of all ages, that the high-born and the noble enjoy no superiority in the kingdom of Messiah. They of the most lowly parentage, may be seen marching upward to the skies, and seizing that crown of glory, which never fades, while among the glittering throng, decked with stars and diadems, few are endued with the magnanimity to trample on terrestrial vanities, and rise, by faith in the Son of God, to the joys of his kingdom.

Do we admire the splendours of wealth and fashion? These imply no title to the peculiar privileges of God's elect. Among those, who ride in pomp and shine in the circles of gayety, would any of us expect to find very frequent examples of evangelical humility, spirituality, and that faith which overcomes the world? Who, in passing through our cities, would think of looking first among the ranks of opulence, and splendour, and fashion, for examples of meek, unpretending, and devoted service in the cause of Jesus Christ? Blessed be God, in the ranks of the rich, there are some, who, like Joseph of Arimathea, have been taught to feel that the noblest use of wealth is its consecration to the honour of Christ; and that no treasure is worthy of being coveted, except such as may survive the ruins of the last conflagration and be carried with us into eternity. But how rare is such magnanimity! "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God. Hath not God chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom, which he hath promised to them that love him?"

Do we aspire after rank and office? Well may our ambition be chilled, when we remember the too common character of those, who rise to the highest stations of trust and honour among men. It is not easy to unite the eager pursuit of earthly promotion, with an integrity that never yields to circumstances, and never falters; and it is far more difficult, if not impossible, to associate such a spirit with the unvarnished simplicity and meekness of the gospel. Divine grace has sometimes presented to our view a David, an Hezekiah, or an Alfred, to teach us that no station is above its reach; but to confound the pride of station, it has commonly descended, for its most signal triumphs, into those lowly regions of society, towards which imperial majesty would scarcely deign a look. It has assigned to obscure fishermen and carpenters the privilege of leading

> "on to glorious war,
> The sacramental host of God's elect;"

while senators and kings despise, and wonder, and perish.

Do we applaud the popular virtues—industry, uprightness, generosity, patriotism? It is well. In their connexion with the present life, they cannot be too highly esteemed; and they will exist and flourish wherever the gospel exerts its sanctifying influence on the heart. But, as they may live and shoot forth vigorously, disjoined from the principle of evangelical obedience, so they give no promise of renovating grace; and are not seldom found in combination with that high-minded pride, which, more than any other spirit, breathes hostility to the saintly attributes, exemplified and enforced in the gospel. No wonder then, that the splendid virtue which all unite to admire, should often fail of heaven. So it is; and, on the other hand, not unfrequently men of a character originally little deserving of esteem, are impressed, created anew, and trained up for glory, by the mysterious agency of that Spirit, "who worketh all things after the council of his own will."

And what shall we say of that *decent morality, seriousness, and respect for religious institutions*, which it is the prayer of every good man may become universal? Do they infallibly issue in regeneration,—in real, deep and established piety? Does not the sober man often find quiet in his soberness, the formalist trust to his formality, and the superficial religionist, like multitudes of the ancient Jews, live and die ignorant of the only method by which a sinner can gain forgiveness and the favour of his Maker? The amiable ruler, impressed with the importance of the friendship of God, comes with eager haste, and, falling on his knees, as if wholly intent upon salvation, proposes to Jesus the question, of all others most interesting to man, "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" He had shunned all the grosser forms of vice and profaneness; and seems to have been adorned with a thousand lovely qualities. But a single proposal for proving his sincerity betrayed the actual state of his heart—his self-indulgence—his supreme devotedness to the world. He "went away grieved." But while men of pharisaical strictness go away and die, rejecting the Saviour; sinners of the most profligate character are, in many instances, arrested, awed, subdued, reformed, and justified, by the power of redeeming grace.

5. *In the means which God employs for the salvation of sinners*, it is evidently his design to abase human pride.

He has commenced a mighty system of grace, the issue of which shall be the complete redemption of a multitude that no man can number, and an inconceivable accession of knowledge, bliss and glory to the holy universe. It might be imagined that, in effecting a purpose so august, he would put in requisition, as the most indispensable means, all that we deem efficient in the ordinary events and revolutions of the moral world; and that on these, he would chiefly rely, in the grand enterprise of reclaiming an apostate race.

To the judicious administration of human government we attach an almost resistless energy; and to the operations of this mighty engine, we should naturally look as the leading power to accomplish that change in the sentiments and character of mankind, which Christianity predicts. Human laws, however, have effected little in the propagation of the pure gospel; and where they have assumed any other authority in favour of religion than that of simple protection, they have in general weakened, by their interference, the cause they were intended to support. Governments themselves must be reformed, and present such models of evangelical integrity as they

have rarely exhibited, before they will be prepared to exert any prominent, and ultimately beneficial influence, in direct aid of the gracious designs of the Redeemer. Never have the reality and frequency of his victories been more apparent than when his armies, guided and shielded by his own invincible arm, resisted all the authorities of the Roman empire. And, however we might tremble for the government that should now dare to unsheath its sword against the gospel, we could have no doubt of the ultimate success of the gospel, were it proscribed in the constitution and laws of every nation on earth.

Nor does Christianity obtain its triumphs by philosophy and eloquence. These arts, however important, can accomplish little in reforming the morals; much less in purifying the affections of men, and moulding them into conformity with the spirit of Christ. Sinners never have been, and never will be, subdued to penitence, humility, faith, and obedience, by any fine-spun theories of virtue, however embellished with learning and rhetoric, or by any considerations drawn from present utility, self-esteem, and earthly glory. The reasoning, the declamation, and the persuasion derived from such sources, can have no better influence than to confirm that innate pride in man, which is the grand obstacle to his obedience, while they fix his mind on pursuits, whose highest reward is the approbation of fellow-worms.

The simple doctrines of the cross, united with faith and prayer in the church, are the instruments by which, in spite of all the sneers of infidelity, the great enemy of souls is to be vanquished, and his empire subverted. These are the weapons which ever have been employed in achieving the redemption of sinners. By means of these, the apostles and primitive ministers of Jesus, going forth in the strength of the Holy Spirit, carried their conquests into the very heart of Satan's kingdom, demolishing the strongest bulwarks of prejudice, ignorance, pride, superstition, and idolatry; and bringing into captivity to Christ thousands of thousands who had sustained, unmoved, the combined assaults of the genius, and literature, and taste, and philosophy, of the world. By means of these, far more than by an exposure of the fraud, impurity, and cruelty of the *man of sin*, the reformers undermined his ill-gotten authority, drew forth millions of his slaves to breathe the fresh air of liberty, and imparted to Christian empires an elevation of views, and energy of principle, which will not cease to be remembered and appreciated, till time shall be no more. These despised doctrines have lost none of their efficacy. On them the devoted missionary depends, as the only means which God will bless, to rescue the wretched heathen from the bondage of pollution and shame; and on these he does not depend in vain. The Greenlander, the poor Indian of the western forest, the inhabitants of the isles, and the sable sons of Africa, lift up their voices together, and sing of the wonders accomplished in the name of Jesus, by these calumniated doctrines. In these, as in the cloud of glory, the Angel of the covenant moves on with his church, to enlighten and guide all her journeyings; and from these, as from the same cloud, he pours dismay and terror on her enemies. In every genuine revival of religion, these are the arms with which he smites and conquers; and by these, he will continue to conquer, till earth shall own him Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

6. Of the salvation of the gospel itself, humility is a prominent characteristic.

None can share in the benefits of Christ's redemption, till, condemn-

ing themselves, and renouncing self-righteousness, they are prepared to ascribe the whole praise of their salvation to distinguishing grace; to serve God from pure love and gratitude; and to own for ever, that, in point of personal desert, they can demand nothing better than the full infliction of the punishment denounced against transgressors. Such have been the sentiments and confessions of pious men in every age. "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us; but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake." It has been their delight to solicit favour as a sovereign gift, to sink into their own nothingness, and to exalt, in their affections and songs, the worthy name of Him who is above all blessing and praise. So it is on earth; and so, more eminently and perfectly, it is in heaven. Not an ambitious thought, not one proud or contemptuous emotion, can find entrance there. Heaven indeed has its thrones and its crowns; but they are thrones which none can occupy, crowns which none can wear, save those who willingly refuse all praise to themselves, that it may be given to Jesus, and whose private interests are forgotten, absorbed in the high concerns of his holy kingdom. "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne, and the living creatures, and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing and honour, and glory and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever."

Thus, in the great salvation of the gospel, the loftiness of man is bowed down, and the haughtiness of men is made low, and the Lord alone is exalted: "that no flesh should glory in his presence."

My brethren, do we not find in this subject *convincing proof of the divine origin of the Gospel?* Men are proud; and they cannot easily conceive of happiness which begins in the prostration of their pride, and rises and expands in the same proportion as they are little and worthless in their own esteem. Hence the religion they would frame, would, without doubt, propose rewards, gratifying to an ambitious, covetous, or sensual heart; and such, we know, has been the actual character of every religion on earth, save that which is taught in the Scriptures. Is it credible, that this religion, which wages war with all man's corruptions, sinks him as a guilty pensioner at the footstool of mercy, and exalts by purifying his nature, had a merely human origin? What mind of man formed so sublime a conception? Surely not one that was depraved; and an upright and pure mind must have abhorred the thought of imposing upon us, as a revelation from God, the offspring of its own fancy. Look through the world—I do not say for a parallel,—but for any thing that approaches to the simplicity, and harmony, and grandeur of design, which pervade the records of the Christian's faith, and signalize the whole history of his religion. And as to the humility of the gospel, opposed as it is to all man's sinful prejudices and hopes, it is plainly the virtue which most of all becomes him; the disposition that suits his helplessness, his guilt, and his misery; that cures his irritability, silences his murmurs, reconciles him to all the duties of benevolence, and prepares him to seek and enjoy his supreme felicity in the government and guidance of his heavenly Father. Aside, then, from miracles,

prophecy, and the concurrent records of nature and time, we behold, in the tendency of the gospel, and its mighty influence on the character and happiness of believers, the infallible marks of its divinity.

We learn moreover from this subject, *the principal reason of the opposition of proud men to the gospel.* It has ever been most hated and resisted by those, whose estimation of their own capacity, acquisitions, and virtues, has been the highest. To the self-righteous Jew, it was a stumbling-block; and to the philosophic Greek, it was foolishness. To men of the same character it is still an offence; and among them we find the leaders in error, the angry disputants of the age, the scoffers at all serious religion, and the cool, contemptuous, and *rational* despisers of Christianity in all its forms. Nor is this wonderful. How could it be otherwise, than that such men should manifest hostility to a religion, which pronounces them incapable of the attainment of happiness, without divine teaching; condemns them as sinners, deserving of eternal wrath; and places them, as dependent beings, on a level with the most ignorant and vile of the human race? To be stripped of all their factitious distinctions—to be treated according to the feelings of their hearts, and their conduct towards the divine Saviour,—no wonder, that, at such a thought, the children of pride feel resentment burning within them. All this, however, proves nothing against the gospel. It only proves the inveteracy of man's moral disease; the completeness of his ruin; the necessity of an influence more than human to purify and save him.

Finally: *Let the ministers of Christ, parents, and all others, who would be instrumental in saving sinners, use, for this purpose, the means which God has appointed and approves.* Let your *manner* bear the impress of a heart, glowing with kindness and affectionate zeal. Let your doctrine drop as the rain, and your speech distil as the dew. Entreat with tears. This is well. But then the *matter*—let *that* be the unadulterated gospel, with all its dreaded, hated, humbling peculiarities, explained, proved, pressed with energy, on the conscience and the heart. Nothing else will be of any avail. You cannot *flatter* down the enmity of a carnal world to holiness and to God. The proud hearts of sinners must be broken, before they will receive with thankfulness the tidings of mercy through a Redeemer; and nothing will break their hearts, but the distinguishing truths of the gospel, clearly understood, and powerfully applied by the Holy Ghost. Seeming conversions, produced by any other means, will disappoint your hopes. They may be combined with strong feeling, but they will be superficial, or transient. They may blaze like a meteor lit up at midnight—to be followed by a thicker darkness. May not the apostacies, so often succeeding revivals of religion, and dishonouring these blessed seasons "of refreshing from the presence of the Lord," be traced, in many instances, to a partial, distorted, or ambiguous exhibition of those doctrines of the cross, which exalt God, and humble the pride of man? Let these then be the great theme of Christian teachers, and of the church, when they would present their mightiest force against the empire of sin, rooted as it is in the prejudices, passions, earthly interests, and multiplied corruptions of mankind. Have nothing to do with a tame, time-serving, compromising Christianity. Wield the sword of the Spirit, naked and burnished in all the dazzling brightness of its terrors, as well as of its mercy; call upon the earth to behold; invoke the heavens to your aid; press onward in the strength of God; till the impassioned inquiry, "*Men and brethren, what must we do?*"—mingled with the shouts of the ransomed, shall break forth from every land, and hamlet, and habitation of man.

SERMON XXXI.

By JOHN WOODBRIDGE, D.D.

GOD'S RESPECT TO THE LOWLY.

Psalm cxxxviii. 6.—*Though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly.*

On a survey of the works of God, as the products of his power and skill, the thought which first impresses us, is that of his unsearchable greatness. All parts of the creation proclaim his glories. The emotions of sublimity, inspired by the wide-spreading forest, the cataract, the mountain rearing its summit to the sky, the blue expanse over our heads, and the mighty wastes and billows of the ocean, can hardly fail to be associated with overwhelming conceptions of his omnipotence and grandeur. These sentiments are heightened in proportion to the extent of our field of vision; and to the most uninstructed mind, a cloudless evening sky presents a scene of wonder, to which all the magnificence of earth is poor. When we contemplate the heavens, by the light of science, as the stupendous array of worlds, and suns, and systems, all moving on, in wondrous harmony, to subserve the will of their Maker,—when, having mused on all that the eye, or the telescope can discover, we still imagine ourselves to be standing at the vestibule of the universe, and conceive of other firmaments, stretching into immensity—to us, insects of an hour, confined to this little planet, the creation itself seems infinite;—how great then is He, who spoke and it was done, who commanded and it stood fast? His resources are neither exhausted, nor diminished; and in a moment he could create a new empire, compared with which, all that now exists should seem as a drop in the bucket, or as dust in the balance. With these views vividly before us, all our conscious importance in the scale of being is lost; man dwindles into a speck, a nothing: and the inquiry will naturally arise, What can be his assurance of the continued care, protection and kindness of his Almighty Creator? By deeper thought, by a more attentive study of his works and word, we learn the consoling truth, that his observation is as minute, as his knowledge is boundless, and his love as tender, as his greatness is incomprehensible. He is the Guardian, the Parent, of the meanest, no less than of the most illustrious of his creatures. The hand, which sustains and moves worlds, supports all, adorns all, blesses all; it paints the tulip and the rose, feeds the ravens, and imparts to the insect that glitters in the sun-beams, its vivacity and gladness. The Mighty God looks from his habitation upon the children of men; "he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust;" but he is peculiarly the Friend, the Protector, the Father of all such, as reverence his name, submit to his authority, and trust in his mercy. "Though the Lord be high, *yet hath he respect unto the lowly.*"

To illustrate, in a number of particulars, the affecting truth taught in this passage, will be my object in the present discourse.

1. God hath respect to the *character* of the lowly.

He knows indeed all that vileness, over which they mourn; and, as a God of purity, he must hate sin, in whomsoever it is found. But he witnesses also their ingenuous relentings, their earnest application to him for mercy through the atonement; he sees them retracing their steps, bowing at his throne, and sinking into their proper place, as his creatures, and as sinners. These expressions of a filial spirit he loves; his fatherly heart yearns over the returning prodigals; his paternal arms are extended to embrace them. He views in them his own image restored; he beholds them taking part with himself against a revolted world, and joined in the temper of their hearts to his beloved Son; and he bids them welcome to all the provisions, endearments and joys of his happy family. "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus, Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the Lord my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth. Is Ephraim my dear son? is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord.—Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." "But the proud he knoweth afar off." He sustains them, confers upon them his benefits, requires their obedience and holds them accountable at his bar; but he abhors them still as rebels, whose aims and pursuits break in upon the order of the universe, and tend to dissolve that beautiful harmony, which connects in one grand system of benevolence all the parts of his moral kingdom. He must frown upon men, who, instead of aiming at his glory, that supreme point of attraction in the holy creation, would exalt themselves, by trampling down his authority, and spurning from them the offered grace of the gospel.

2. The Lord hath respect to the *prayers* of the lowly.

When we contemplate God in his majesty, the immensity of his essence, the infinitude of his knowledge, the boundlessness of his power, dwelling in light inaccessible, the universal Creator, the Director of moving worlds, the Life of heaven, before whom bow myriads of angels, celebrating his praises in everlasting songs,—dare we indulge the thought, that prayers, offered to Him by sinful children of the dust, can be heard and accepted? These suggestions of unbelief, plausible and imposing as they are, spring from our ignorance of God, our low and unworthy conceptions of his tender mercy. Invested in all the glory of his own perfections, he is also the Refuge, the Hope, of his people. Nor are the wise and the great of this world the only men, invited to the exalted privilege of communion with Him who rules over all. Passing by the proud, he receives from the lowly in heart the worship in which he delights. Be they tenants of the cottage or the prison, be they wanderers in deserts and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth; it is all one; their sighs of penitence, their confessions, and fervent applications for mercy, are music in his ear. Do they cry to him for knowledge, and lift up their voice for understanding? He regards their cry. Jehovah is their Instructer. His Spirit dissipates from their minds the mists of prejudice, purifies their moral taste, reveals to them, through the medium of sanctified affections, the glory of his word, inspires them with a reverence of his authority, and thus prepares them,

with the simplicity of children, to understand and embrace his testimony, on every subject connected with their duty, and their immortal interests. "Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.—In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight."—Do they ask for the forgiveness of sin? The gracious Father meets with joy, and adorns with his best robe, and entertains with princely magnificence, his long lost, but now penitent son. The simple petition, issuing from a broken heart—"*God, be merciful to me a sinner*"—ascends to the heaven of heavens, and engages all the energies of infinite love to deliver and bless the most needy and guilty. They are encouraged, in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgivings, to make their requests known to God. He assures them that he is more ready, in answer to their prayers, to bestow upon them the richest spiritual favours, than any human parent can be, to give bread to his hungry children. "I never said to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye my face in vain." O, it would require volumes, more than the world has yet seen, to tell the exploits of humble and earnest prayer. I might refer you for proofs of its efficacy, to all the saints, whose history is recorded by inspiration. I might speak of Jacob, and Moses, and Joshua, and Samuel, and David, and the prophets, and the apostles of the Lamb. I might show you how a spirit of prayer in the church has ever been the harbinger of her emancipation from bondage, or of the enlargement of her territory, or of the overthrow of her enemies. But I forbear. It is the prayer of the lowly only, which so prevails with God. "He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away. He will regard the prayer of the destitute; he will not despise their prayer."

3. God hath respect to the lowly, in that he *strengthens them, in their spiritual conflicts.*

The scriptures represent the Christian life in language expressive of the most strenuous exertions and the severest toils. It is a race, a wrestling, a fight of faith. The foes of the believer are many and strong, now lurking in ambush, now amusing him with false colours of peace, now circumventing him in silence, now rushing upon him with all their combined force, as armies prepared for battle. The world and the legions of hell continually beset him; they are staunch, irreconcilable enemies; and if they flatter, it is but to deceive, and betray, and destroy. More than all, his peace, usefulness and salvation are endangered by his inbred corruptions, those traitors in his own bosom. Against all these foes, both without and within, he must watch and contend every moment, all his way to the celestial city. Were he to meet them in his own strength, he would fall at the first onset. They have overthrown the mighty; they have carried into captivity, and led down to perdition, multitudes of the honourable of the earth. What then can the feeble saint do in such a conflict? He feels his own insufficiency. He knows, by sorrowful experience, that, when he would do good, evil is present with him; and that his strength is weakness. In vain, does he ask help from creatures. Nature supplies no armory, adapted to his defence, in the hour of assault and peril; the arrows from her quiver fall, imbecile and broken, in the dark affray. He looks upward—a vigilant eye marks all his movements, a cheering voice animates him to the contest, the shield of Omnipotence is spread before him, the sword of the Spirit scatters and subdues his enemies. "This is the victory

that overcometh the world, even our faith." The God that guides the planets, and calls by their names all the hosts of heaven, is on his right hand, and on his left; teaches his hands to war, and his fingers to fight; raises him, when fallen; heals him, when wounded; revives him, when fainting; leads him; carries him forward from conquest to conquest, till his labours are finished, and he triumphs in death. Why should we wonder? Stripped of self-dependence, he rises and prevails in the strength of him who is Almighty. "Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles: they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

4. God hath respect to the *exertions* of the lowly, in the cause of truth and holiness on earth.

Earthly influence, and wisdom, and authority can, of themselves, do nothing, in the high enterprise of enlightening and evangelizing the world. They may be subordinate agents, as are all things else, in fulfilling the designs of heaven towards the church. But the direct means, without which all others would prove ineffectual, or operate against the benevolent counsels of the Redeemer of men, are the prayers, and sacrifices, and faithful labours of the lowly in heart.—Who are they, by whose instrumentality, the gospel, in the days of the apostles, triumphed over the false learning, and boasted eloquence, and deep corruption of the Gentile world? Who raised the standard of the cross in Asia Minor, the cities of Greece, and the remotest regions of the Roman empire, carrying salvation to the cottage and the camp, the haunts of poverty and ignorance, the schools of philosophers, and the palaces of kings? Not the Jewish sanhedrim—not proud Pharisees, trusting to their own righteousness—not the followers of Zeno, or Plato; but a company of humble men, of whom most were unlearned, and all had been taught to count their acquisitions as loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ. Who were the individuals, employed by Providence, to shake mystical Babylon to its foundations, and pour the light of day into the dark cells of papal delusion and imposture? They were learned, they were profound, they were indefatigable; but, beyond all this, they had known the plague of their own hearts, and the value of the gospel; they had seen themselves justly exposed to perdition; they had cordially recognised and loved their dependence; they had been driven from every other refuge to the free grace of the Redeemer. Yes, they were men of humility and prayer; and they well knew that the conversion of sinners was to be effected, not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of God. Much has lately been accomplished, in revivals of religion at home, and the enlargement of Messiah's kingdom among the heathen. But what have been the instruments, by which this moral revolution has commenced, and is now advancing towards its consummation, in the overthrow of all idolatry and error, and the universal establishment of the reign of righteousness and peace? Who are they at whose approach the wilderness and solitary places are glad, and the desert rejoices and blossoms as the rose? They are men imbued with that spirit which drew from the apostle of the Gentiles the humble and grateful acknowledgement, "By the grace of God, I am what I am; I laboured more abundantly than

they all; yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." They are men, who, like Brainerd, mourn over their imperfections, and throw themselves continually upon the resources of all-sufficient grace, rather than indulge self-complacency, in view of their privations, and toils, and sufferings. They abhor the thought of sharing with their Saviour the minutest portion of the glory of his achievements. They would give him all, and lie at his feet, as penitent and thankful petitioners, and recipients of his bounty. O! if there were more of this self-abasing spirit in the church—if the visible friends of Jesus would pray, and weep, and labour, as becomes the redeemed servants of such a Master—a new era would speedily begin; the beauties of holiness would clothe all Christendom, now deformed by ignorance and infidelity, and crime; and the day-star of mercy, with splendour and gladness in its beams, would rise upon all nations.

5. God hath respect to all the *best interests* of the lowly, for time and eternity.

Jehovah has condescended to speak to the sinful, feeble, and dying children of men; and the volume, containing the record of his will, abounds with such glorious promises, as none other than himself could give. And to whom are they addressed? Not one of them is for the proud, however pre-eminent in talents, exalted in station, or illustrious in fame. They are all for men of another character; and to the humble, though despised, or forgotten, or persecuted on earth, belong the immense blessings of that gracious covenant, which is ordered in all things and sure. "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for their's is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth."

The Providence of God illustrates and establishes his word. For the lowly, he governs the world; visits it with sunshine and showers; produces the vicissitudes of the seasons; gives fruitfulness, and plenty, and peace; awakes the elements to fury, and composes them in his mercy; directs in the tempest of insurrection and war; arrests its violence; and kindles on the bosom of the stormy cloud the bow of serenity and promise. He restrains the enemies of his children; and forces the most malignant passions, the darkest designs, and the most untoward events, to contribute to their purification, or more speedy admission to the joys of Paradise.

The Most High ordains, for their greatest good, all the circumstances of their condition in the present world. If they are prosperous, it is that they may be the more grateful; and, by a due employment of their wealth and influence, reap the rewards of an active liberality, as well as promote the knowledge, virtue, and happiness of their species. If they are poor and afflicted, it is for the trial and improvement of their faith; that his grace may be honoured by their patience, and steadfast confidence in his paternal care; that the ties which bind them to earth may be weakened; and their aspirations after the purity and peace of heaven make welcome the hour of their release from the sins and sorrows of mortality. Their health, their estate, their families, all things connected with their enjoyment in the present life, are peculiarly under his guardianship; and not a hair can fall from their heads, but by his appointment. He limits the period of their earthly existence; and mercifully ordains the means and all the circumstances of its termination. "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust."

For the lowly, he has prepared, beyond "this visible, diurnal sphere," mansions of undecaying beauty, where the fear of death can never enter, and the storms of revolution are unknown; where there is no night, and the glory of God and the Lamb is the light thereof for ever. The grave is the narrow entry to those everlasting abodes. How happy then to die. How happy, to be with Christ, to behold his glory, to fall prostrate in his presence, to exult in his smiles, and join the multitudes of holy beings, from all worlds, in endless ascriptions of praise to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The very bodies of the saints rest in hope. Their full redemption is secured; and, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump, the dead shall be raised incorruptible. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality." Would we describe?—we cannot even conceive the fulness, the purity, the duration of that bliss, to which the redeemed family will be exalted in the new heavens and the new earth they are destined to inhabit. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

Since all the blessings of eternity are for the lowly, and for them only, suffer me, my hearers, to ask you, what is your character? Do you trust, for acceptance with God, to the decencies and moralities of your life, or the homage paid to your virtue and usefulness, by the world? "The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost." Do you rely for justification, on any regularity in your devotions, on any assumed sanctity and austerity of manners? The proud and ostentatious Pharisees, whom the merciful Saviour condemned as hypocrites, could boast of greater strictness. Have you seen and lamented the evil of your hearts? In the light of the glory of God, has sin assumed a deformity before unsuspected; all your comeliness within you been turned into corruption; and every plea from the infirmity of your nature, the violence of temptation, and the sincerity of your endeavours been for ever silenced? Have you bowed to his authority with reverence, and awe, and delight? Has the controversy you maintained with his law and government, while his terrors were upon you, been succeeded by a calm acquiescence in his will, and the acceptance of the punishment of your iniquity? Have you felt, do you still feel happy in the thought, that God reigns, that he reigns over you, and that he will so dispose of you, and of all his creatures for ever, as to ensure, in the highest degree, the honour of his own great name?

If you have fallen thus low in your own esteem, you have seen, with new eyes, the wonders and the glories of redemption by the cross; you have clung to it as your last and only security; you have cried for more mercy; you have consecrated yourselves, body and soul, to the service of your divine Deliverer. You pant after perfect conformity to Christ. You live at the throne of grace. All your comforts die, if you neglect prayer. Your self-abasement before God discovers itself in your whole demeanour. There is a *lowliness* in your intercourse with men, an amiable self-distrust, an honouring of others, a readiness to do the most humiliating offices of love; in place of the arrogance, and contempt of others, and odious selfishness, which, however you might have studied to conceal them under the forms of a hollow-hearted civility and gentleness, once marked your character. You have learned to feel for others' woes,—to forgive and to bless even your enemies. There is in true humility, an unaffected sweetness, an angel kindness, of which the boasted politeness of the world is but a heartless imitation.

Whoever you may be to whom this character belongs, the blessings annexed to it are yours. Receive them with gratitude, and employ to purposes worthy of your exalted privileges, the consolations which your Maker gives.

Christian friends, let humility be the beginning and the crown of all your virtues. Let it regulate your zeal, purify your devotions, and give elevation, and dignity, and the hope of success, to all your enterprises. It is this, which renders you amiable in the sight of Heaven, ensures your peace and usefulness, and engages all the perfections of God for your protection, guidance, and ultimate victory over your spiritual enemies. And what inducements to growth in humility are set before you? With all your attainments in holiness, how must you sink into nothing before Him, in whose sight the heavens are not clean? How few and faint the lineaments of your resemblance to the meek and lowly Jesus, your Lord and Saviour? He was all diligence, all love, all zeal, all fidelity. What have you done to prove your title to the character of his disciples? Turn your eyes to inferior examples; to mere men like yourselves,—to Paul, and John, and Brainerd, and a multitude of others, whose whole life was a sacrifice to the glory of their Master, and the interests of his kingdom. What have been your efforts, your toils, your sufferings, your achievements? O that you would feel your deficiencies, and mourn and pray over them, till a new vigour, imparted by almighty grace, should diffuse itself through all your faculties, and impel you to memorable deeds, which should tell on the interests of a world lying in wickedness, and on the destinies of other generations.

Let the worldly, the self-righteous, the proud of every name, learn the littleness, vanity and guilt of all their aspiring pretensions. I might tell you of the unreasonableness of your self-estimation, the obligations you have violated, your moral ruin, your dependence, your frailty, the grave, the worm, the last trumpet, the dread tribunal, the eternal pit of wo; and in view of all these realities, I might surely urge, with appalling emphasis, the doctrine of humility.

Would you be truly *great?* Humility is the true greatness of man, as self-exaltation is his deepest disgrace. It is the greatness of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs; allying the child of sinfulness and dust to the ransomed of the Lord in a brighter world; attaching his interests to the honours and kingdom of the great Redeemer; opening to his weeping, ardent eye, the way of access to God the Father. What spectacle so grand as that of the lowly penitent summoning to his succour eternal strength, and, cheered with beams from the Sun of Righteousness, triumphing over all the powers of darkness?

It is a greatness, which no worldly vicissitudes can impair. Fortune, and fame, and all that the ambitious covet, may flee away; he, who exults in prosperity to-day, may be a wretch to-morrow; the heavens, all brightness now, may, anon, be blackened with storms; the fairest hopes may be wrecked in a moment; and despair sit brooding over the ruins of all that the fond heart of man had cherished and idolized. But humility dissolves the charm of earthly attractions; it makes us independent of all below the skies; it fixes our hopes on the undecaying glories of heaven. It never forsakes us. It attends the peasant to his cottage, his frugal table, his homely toils; inspires him with a serenity, which conquerors may sigh after in vain; and raises him to a moral elevation, above the utmost flight of their ambition. It follows to his cell the victim of persecution, and invests him with a grandeur, to which even the imperial purple is beggarly defilement. All other greatness is momentary. But this is durable. It smiles at death; it walks with angels through the dark valley; it reposes on the bosom of Jesus; it will burst the prison of the grave; it will triumph in immortal beauty; it will shine with celestial radiance, when stars and suns are extinguished for ever.